

APRIL STUDY

# NO SHORTCUTS...

## A RECIPE FOR BIBLICAL EDIFICATION



Key Verses: *Ecclesiastes 3:1-3; various other Scriptures*

Again, we turn to Solomon's words regarding "a time for everything." This month our focus will be on his acknowledgement of "a time to tear down and a time to build" (*Ecclesiastes 3:3b*). The act of building up is known as *edification*. Spiritually speaking, edification involves promotion of spiritual growth in or building up of individual believers and the Church as a whole.

The disciple-making ministry of the Great Commission (*Matthew 28:18-20*) does not end with evangelism but also includes edification. In His command to make new disciples, Jesus included the responsibility of teaching them [i.e., new disciples] to obey all things that He commanded. This teaching continues to be critical for the ongoing ministry of the Church from generation to generation.

A *disciple* is a true learner or follower of a master to whom he or she is committed. Ultimately, a disciple's goal is to become more and more like his or her master. This change or transformation for a Christian means growing into the likeness of Christ.

Although salvation is a change of status before God, from being lost to being saved, and occurs when a person believes in and confesses Jesus as Savior and

Lord (*Romans 10:9*), moral and spiritual transformation into the likeness of Christ is an ongoing lifetime process. There are no shortcuts for this process. This study is designed to help readers understand and teach new disciples as well as support and strengthen their own growth process. As each individual grows more and more into the likeness of Christ, the Church is strengthened, and its influence in the world grows.

### **Effort and Objective of Christian Growth**

In *Galatians 4:19-20*, we read a very interesting statement by the Apostle Paul. Paul was in great consternation about some of the Galatian believers who were yielding to Judaizers' insistence that Gentile believers must observe Jewish laws and practices. Notice how painful this situation was to Paul.

Paul's pain was the result of the weak faith of Gentile believers. What did he long to see in those people he called *my little children*? He longed to see them have solid faith in Jesus Christ, with His character being formed in them. If this were a true state of being for them, false teachers would no longer sway them. Rather, they would grasp the concept of grace, Christ would be Lord in their lives, and they would

truly embrace His teachings (cf. Romans 13:14; Colossians 1:27-29).

Without stretching the meaning of this text, a couple of important points can be made related to edification:

- The role of the disciple-maker is one of labor intensive experiences. Just as Paul expressed agony similar to birthing pains as he concerned himself over these weak Christians, we who make disciples must be wholly committed to the task, even to the point of intense labor. We must not leave them to figure everything out for themselves.

- The formation of Christ within His followers is the objective of the Christian life. As Christ is formed in the believer, God is glorified.

Probably the most important thing a disciple-maker can do for a new believer is help that person make sure his or her faith is built on a foundation of grace, not works. Being formed into the likeness of Christ is a lifelong process, and unless the foundation of that faith building is solidly constructed of the grace of Jesus Christ there could be serious struggles along the way.

### Exploration and Interaction With the Word

Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-11 and 2 Timothy 2:14-19. From these Scripture passages, what

do we learn about the foundation for our Christian faith?

Why is this an important part of Christian discipleship?

What elements might be mixed into a Christian's faith foundation that might weaken his or her life and development as a disciple of Christ?

How can we participate in eliminating (tearing down) anything except Christ from one's faith foundation?

Before a building can go up, a strong foundation needs to be formed. As we review our own Christian faith, and as we serve as teachers, mentors, or disciplers of others, we must understand some key doctrines of the faith. The first is this: Christ Jesus is the foundation of our faith (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Nothing else is the foundation, and anything else added to the purity of our faith foundation needs to be eliminated. Again, we find wisdom in Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 3:3b.

## Reflection and Response

Reviewing the basic doctrines of the Christian faith is a healthy practice for every Christian, even those who have been following Christ for many years. Sometimes people let personal preferences, local church customs, and even sin interfere with spiritual growth and influence on others. This might be a good time to check to see if your faith is solidly built on Christ alone.

What must you consider as you do this check-up for yourself?

How can you help new believers gain assurance of salvation and begin to build a life of faith?

## Power and Process of Christian Growth

Building a life of faith on a sure foundation (Jesus Christ) is an ongoing lifetime process. The agent of all Christian growth is the Holy Spirit. Paul acknowledged the transformative role of the Holy Spirit in his letters, especially when he wrote to the Corinthians. (See 2 Corinthians 1:20-22; 3:3-6, 8, 17-18.) The growth of Christ followers into the likeness of Christ is not something that can be forced by a teacher or discipler, nor can it be gained by mere good works.

Spiritual growth is a Spirit-

driven process of ongoing grace in the believer's life. This does not mean the Christ follower has no personal responsibility in his or her growth. Primarily, the believer's responsibilities include staying closely connected to the Lord, to love and obey Him, and to love others (John 15:1-17; Matthew 22:37-40). Without over simplifying or over exaggerating those responsibilities, we need to ask how a person can be successful in fulfilling those responsibilities in this growth process.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul wrote that bodily exercise profits little, but godliness is profitable unto all things (1 Timothy 4:7b-8). Paul concludes with, "Exercise thyself unto godliness." Paul knew that growth into godliness, or Christ-likeness, requires intentional action by the Christian. We call this type of activity *spiritual discipline*.

Dr. Don Whitney, author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, wrote that spiritual disciplines are "habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times".<sup>1</sup>

While doing these basic disciplines, the believer spends time with God, intentionally opening herself up for more of His work in and through her.

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<sup>1</sup>Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. (Colorado Springs: Nav-Press, 1991) p.17.

## Exploration and Interaction With the Word

Even Jesus practiced a few key disciplines in his life, and following His example might be the best approach to discovering the practices that are most beneficial for all Christians in their process of growth into the likeness of Christ.

Take some time to skim through the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) to discover some of the spiritual disciplines Jesus practiced. Jot down the references, with an identifying comment or two to help you remember the text.

Reference	Example
Matthew 4:4-17	Discipline Fasting; silence; memorization
Mark 1:35	Solitude; prayer

Although multiple lists of spiritual disciplines have been identified and used, Jesus Himself modeled the most beneficial ones. In His written story, we see Jesus in prayer, fasting, silence, solitude, Scripture intake, and worship. Each of these practices observed by Jesus can become valuable disciplines for the believer who wishes to know Him better. The better we know Him, the more we will love Him and grow to be more like Him.

## Reflection and Response

How is your spiritual growth process? Do you observe any

spiritual exercises that are meaningfully positioning you for the Spirit's work of growing you into the likeness of Christ? What evidence is there of this growth? Jesus said evidence of our connection to Him would be our obedience, love, and fruit (John 15). Examine your life, pray for His guidance, and do what you must for your growth and that of others under your influence.

## The Word of God and the Christian's Growth Process

The ultimate purposes of observing spiritual discipline are for connecting more intentionally with our Lord and for positioning ourselves for the Holy Spirit's work in us as He forms us into the likeness of Christ. We must be careful not to let spiritual disciplines become laws or rituals for ourselves or others.

Probably the two most classic and beneficial of all the spiritual disciplines are prayer and Bible intake. These two disciplines are much like a conversational approach to knowing God. Through both prayer and Bible intake we have a chance to hear from God and speak to Him.

The Bible is the written Word of God, preserved through the ages for His purpose. All Christ-followers should be encouraged to read and study the Bible. These two practices fall under a larger



category of disciplines known as Bible-intake, according to pastor/Bible professor Donald Whitney.<sup>2</sup> The other three practices in this category are hearing, memorizing, and meditating upon the Word of God.

How do you read the Scriptures or listen to it being spoken? For what do you read or listen? If it is for information, you can get it if you pay attention. Should a Christian's reading or hearing Scripture be only for the purpose of acquiring new information? No.

How we hear from God depends on how we approach the reading and the hearing of His word. Gaining information is beneficial, of course, but the Word of God is also for the hearer's formation (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

### Exploration and Interaction With the Word

Read the following passages of Scripture and find the saying common to all the passages (with slight variation in some cases). Jot down the saying and think about its significance in each context.

Matthew 11:1-19

Matthew 13:1-23

Matthew 13:24-30, 34-43

Mark 4:1-20

Mark 4:21-25

Luke 8:1-15

Luke 14:25-35

Revelation 2:1-7

Revelation 2:8-11

Revelation 2:12-17

Revelation 2:18-29

Revelation 3:1-6

Revelation 3:7-13

Revelation 3:14-22

(Note: The common saying is, he who has ears, let him hear.)

Why does this phrase appear so many times in Scripture? Teachers learn that repetition is an important method for helping children learn. Perhaps this simple phrase does merit some attention.

### Reflection and Response

Do you really want to hear God speak through His word directly to your heart and mind? Are you willing to let His words transform you? Are you reading the Bible primarily for information about God and His dealings with mankind, or do you read it so you can grow closer to Him and allow His Spirit to work in your life through it? Jot down your thoughts in response to these questions.

If you read and listen to Scripture primarily for information, ask God to help you approach His word differently. Ask Him to help you become more open to His

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<sup>2</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

transformational Word and change you every time you read or hear His Word. Be ready to help anyone you are discipling develop this mindset regarding Scripture, too.

### Prayer's Role in Christian Growth

Obviously, Jesus believed in and practiced prayer. Prayer is a spiritual discipline misunderstood by many Christ-followers and fervently practiced by only a few. In this age of busy schedules and constant distractions, finding a time and place to have a conversation with God is almost impossible unless a person works at it.

Bill Hybels, author of *Too Busy Not to Pray: Slowing Down to Be With God*, wrote that prayer is a heart building habit.<sup>3</sup> Prayer is an essential discipline in the faith building process.

Although life's seasons might tend to control a person's time, places, and opportunities for disciplines such as prayer, everyone who is truly in Christ must try to make quality time to talk with the Lord. Having long prayers is not what's important. Focusing on Jesus and conversing with Him is the discipline every Christ follower needs to practice. Jesus was very busy and was sought after by multitudes, but He still managed to get away from the crowds, even away

from those disciples who stayed with Him, so He could talk with His Father. Surely, if this practice was necessary for Him, it must be necessary for each of His followers.

### Exploration and Interaction With the Word

Read the following passages of Scripture and learn from Jesus about prayer. Jot down some key points about how to pray and for what we should be praying (Matthew 6:5-13; Luke 11:1-4).

Prayer formulas are not necessary, but some people, especially new believers, desire a pattern or guide for their prayer. (One example is ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.) There are pros and cons to sharing such patterns, so each discipler will have to decide what to do about this. The best way to learn about prayer is to read the Bible, find everything Jesus taught and did related to prayer, and follow His example and instructions. Then, pray.

### Reflection and Response

Prayer is not hard, but many Christians live as if it is. That means, many of us talk about prayer, but we do not really pray very often or with fervent faith.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not to Pray: Slowing Down to Be With God*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998.) p.41.

The way to change this is to confess the weakness, ask the Lord for guidance and help in developing a more effective prayer life, and engage in the discipline. This is a vital part of one's own growth, and all disciplers must be able to teach new Christians

to engage in the practice. The old adage, "Practice what you preach" must come into play here.

**About the writer:** Janice Banks has been active in Christian ministry since graduation from Welch College. She recently retired from full-time teaching at Hillsdale FWB College.

